**Sunday 7th June 2020**

**Sermon on Matthew 28:16 – 20**

**Theme*:* “Thank you, O our Father...”**

**“Praise God from whom all blessings flow...”**

***(Songs ATOK 349, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”)***

***Introduction:***

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day on which we focus on the fact that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In most other years, on Trinity Sunday, I’ve gone to great trouble to outline why we confess that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit….

I’ve explained at length how the only way that the early Christian could make sense of their experience of God as our dear Father in heaven, of Jesus was God among us, and of the Spirit was God in us, was to confess that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and that together they are God.

And in the past, I’ve tried to help us understand the concept of the Trinity by using illustrations like water *as ice, liquid water, and steam,* and an apple *as skin, flesh, and core….*

So in the past, on Trinity Sunday, I’ve looked at the doctrine of the Trinity in detail. This year, though, I just want to try to enable us to better appreciate God: to better understand what He is like, how much He loves you and me, and the lengths to which He has gone to rescue us. To do this, I want to tell you a fairy story,,,, *It’s a fairy story like that of Cinderella and Snow White, so bear with me please as I tell it…. I’ll think that you’ll gradually work out why I’m telling it….*

***The Story:***

The story goes like this. *It’s a fairy story, as I said, so of course, it begins with “once upon a time”….*

**Once upon a time there was a woodcutter who lived on the outskirts of a huge forest.** **His name was Lars, and Lars knew this forest like the back of his hand. He knew every trail in the forest.**

**One day while Lars was getting ready to cut down a tree in the forest, he heard a cooing sound not very far away. He followed the sound and discovered two beautiful white doves caught in a wooden trap. “Poor birds”, Lars thought. “If I don’t free them, surely they will die”. Lars quickly opened the trap, and freed the birds. They flew away happily into the sky. Then Lars went back to cutting down his tree, and forgot all about the birds.**

**Soon after that, Lars met a beautiful young woman. He married her and went to live with her in a town some distance from the forest, where he found a new job and prospered with his family.**

**Twenty five years then came and went. One day, Lars decided to revisit his forest. He had often thought of going back to his beloved forest, and so that morning all those years later he kissed his wife, and headed back to the forest for the day.**

**When he got to the forest, he headed into it, and followed some familiar pathways towards the centre of the forest. Soon though, things began to look unfamiliar, and eventually he became lost in the centre of the forest. It grew dark, and just as he was trying to find a bush where he could sleep for the night, he saw a light in the distance. Strange”, he thought, “I don’t remember anyone living there”.**

**He followed the light and knocked on the door. After a few moments the door creaked open, and there standing in the door was the strangest woman that Lars had ever seen. Her skin was really white, and her eyes sort of glowed. And she had long black hair that hung down below her waist. “Can I help you?”, she asked in a raspy voice.**

**“I’m lost”, said Lars, “and I’m hungry and cold. And I need a place to sleep”. “Come right in”, said the woman.**

**Lars felt very uncomfortable going in, but he was hungry and cold, and the house was warm and there was food on the table. When Lars had eaten, he turned to thank the woman, but she was nowhere to be seen.** **Suddenly there was a hissing from the corner of the room. Lars looked towards where the sound came from, and there in the corner of the room, there was this huge black snake slowly slithering towards him.**

**When the snake reached him, it stood up straight on its tail and looked at him. The snake had the face of the woman. “Sssso, you have come back at last”, hissed the snake. “I have waited twenty five years for you to come back. Do you remember those two white birds that you set free? They were going to be my evening meal. When I saw you release them, I swore that one day I would kill you”.**

**“I didn’t know that they were yours”, said Lars. “If you had said something, I would never have opened the trap”. “Sssso”, said the snake. “You admit that you set them free. Now I know I have the right person. Tonight, at midnight, I will kill you”.**

**“Is there nothing that can save me”, cried Lars. “Yessss”, the snake said slowly. “If the bell in the old church tower rings twelve times before midnight, you will be free. But since I will not let you leave this house, it is certain that you will be my midnight snack”.**

**Filled with panic, Lars looked about the cabin for a way to escape. But the windows were barred, and the snake stood in front of the only door. Lars thought of his wife and his children. Tears ran down his face. After a long time, he looked up at the clock and saw that it was five minutes to midnight. The snake began to make its way from the doorway towards Lars.**

**Just before the big hand reached the midnight hour, there was a weak sound way off in the distance. It was the sound of a bell. It rang, and it rang again and again. Lars started counting: nine, ten, eleven, twelve rings of the bell.**

**With the last ringing of the bell, the house vanished, and the snake disappeared, and Lars was all alone in the dark forest. Knowing that he couldn’t go anywhere until morning, he curled up and fell fast asleep.**

**When the first rays of the morning sun hit him, Lars woke up, and quickly made his way to the old church in the distance. He wanted to find out who had rung the bell for him. He walked into the church, and quickly climbed up the stairs to the bell tower at the top. He looked at the bell, and he could see spots of blood on the bell. He looked down to the floor of the bell tower, and there he saw white feathers, more blood, and the bodies of the the two white doves who had thrown their tiny bodies at the bell twelve times out of love for the woodcutter***(William J. Bausch, A World of Stories, p. 31-33).*

The story ends in a ‘happy ever after’ fashion, as fairy tales always do. Lars nurses the birds back to life, the birds fly off, and Lars returns to his wife and his children, and all live happily ever after.

***Some Comments:***

What I want to focus on this morning is the picture of those tiny birds battering their bodies against that bell again and again in order to save the woodcutter. Here we have a mental picture which reminds us of what the God who created the universe and all that is, was prepared to do for us. In a module on *Jesus* in the Confirmation course that I’ve used over the years, Jesus is described there as “God in a bod”. That who Jesus was and is: “God become a human being for us”.

Remember what John the Gospel writer says about Jesus in his introduction to his Gospel:

**In the beginning was the Word;**

**the Word was with God,** *in God’s presence,*

**and the Word was God.**

**He was present with God in the beginning….**

**And the Word became flesh**

**and made his dwelling among us.**

**And we have seen his glory,**

**the glory of an only Son coming from the Father,**

**full of grace and truth….**

**Out of the fullness of his grace, he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another**. **God gave the Law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God.**

**The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side, he has made him known** *(John 1,14,16-18).*

The God. who created the universe and us, loves us so much that He was prepared *in the person of the Son* to become a human being, the man Jesus. Jesus, God’s Son, “God in a bod”, told us and showed us what God is like, and then he suffered and died for us on a cross to rescue us.

“God in a bod” battered and bloodied his body for us on a cross in order to rescue us, *just like the birds did in our story did to rescue Lars.* The birds in the story didn’t die, but Jesus did for us. That’s how much God loves each one of us: so much that he was willing to endure all this in order to rescue us *(John 3:16; Rom. 5:8).*

What did God rescue us from? Well, like Lars in the story, we too were facing death, *and were facing being delivered up into the jaws of a snake, Satan.* We each deserve to die and to be separated from God for eternity, because of what we have done to hurt God, hurt one another, and hurt others. But the wonderful news of the Bible is that “God in a bod”, *as one young person once described Jesus,*  has battered and bloodied Himself in order to rescue us. Jesus, God’s Son, suffered the pains of hell for us on the cross, *in our stead,* and he died on the cross for us, *in our stead.*

What did God rescue us from? Well, first of all from being trapped in a darkened room so to speak, *a lot like Lars was in our fairy story.* What darkness am I talking about? Well, the darkness of guilt, and emptiness, and fear, *a darkness which is ours if we live our life apart from God….* Through Jesus, His Son, God has rescued us from darkness and brought us into the sunshine of freedom *(John 8:31-32).*

And secondly, God rescued us through Jesus from the sentence of death. We, like Lars in the story, were facing death, *and were facing being delivered up into the jaws of a snake, Satan.* We each deserve to die and to be separated from God for eternity, because of what we have done to hurt God, hurt one another, and hurt others.

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Paul writes in his letter to the Christians at Rome:

For **the wages of sin is death,** but **the free gift of God is eternal life in union with Christ Jesus our Lord** *(Rom. 6:23).*

At great cost to Himself, God has rescued us,

and all that He has made possible for us is ours for the taking, *ours to the receiving.* God offers to us forgiveness and eternal life, and these gifts are ours for the taking. We receive these gifts through baptism, and by trusting in Jesus as our Saviour” *(cf. “Why Jesus?” ALPHA book, and its emphasis on “freedom from…”, and “freedom for…”),*

And God doesn’t leave us to struggle on by ourselves on our own…. To us who allow ourselves to be rescued by God, God also gives His Spirit. God doesn’t only rescue us, and take us in His family as His forgiven children, but He also comes to live in us in the form of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, “the Spirit of God”, God Himself, lives in each of us who trust in Jesus as our Saviour, and He empowers us to *be* His children, *to be like Jesus (1 Cor. 6:19; 12:3; Rom. 8:29; Gal. 4:6).*

***Conclusion:***

I love songs like the one that we sang just before this message, the song *There is a Redeemer (ATOK #349).* Its words remind us of what God the Father has done for us through the Son*,* and its words remind us of what God is still doing for us through His Spirit:

**Thank you, O our Father,**

**for giving us your Son,**

**and leaving your Spirit**

**till you work on earth is done** *(ATOK #349).*

Let’s now spend time praising God as we sing the song *“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”,* written by Stephen Abraham. As we sing it, praise God for allowing Himself to be battered and bloodied and killed in order to rescue us, and praise God for coming to live in us.